DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 055 967 SP 005 314

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TITLE	New Dimensions for the Learner; A First Look at the Prospects for Non-Traditional Study.
INSTITUTION	Commission on Non-Traditional Study, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	Carnegie Corp. of New York, N.Y.; College Entrance Examination Board, New York, N.Y.; Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J.
PUB DATE	Sep 71
NOTE	12p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 888 Seventh Avenue, New York 10041
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Degree Requirements; *Educational Opportunities; *Experimental Curriculum; *Post Secondary Education; *Special Degree Programs

ABSTRACT

This is a progress report on the first 6 months activity of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study which was established: 1) to examine all aspects of non-traditional postsecondary education, including the external degree, now in operation or being planned; 2) to evaluate the desirability and feasibility of such study; 3) to identify the inadequacies in current data necessary for intelligent decision making and to press for correction of such inadequacies; 4) to make recommendations for creating whatever additional machinery seems appropriate to strengthening the guarantees of quality in these forms of education; 5) to explore the possibility of additional experimental models; and 6) to assure easy accessibility to the large body of information that is presently unsystematized. The Commission has found great interest in non-traditional education, although the term is difficult to define accurately, and the subject matter for non-traditional study is still largely unexplored. Some conclusions are that the philosophy of full opportunity in education should be fostered, that changes should be made by an evolutionary process rather than by radical upheaval, and that special attention should be paid to counseling and guidance for the potential student. More data gathering and other research are necessary and special agencies should be created to deal with accreditation and non-traditional curricula. (MBM)

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NEW DIMENSIONS FOR THE LEARNER

A FIRST LOOK AT THE PROSPECTS
FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDY

SP 005 514

COMMISSION ON NON-TRADITIONAL STUDY
SEPTEMBER 1971

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Additional copies of this report may be obtained from the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 888 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York 10019.

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I

As chairman of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, it is my privilege to make a public statement on the nature and progress of its work during its first six months of activity.

The 26-member Commission, financed for two years by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and jointly sponsored by the Educational Testing Service and the College Entrance Examination Board, held its first meeting at Sarasota, Florida in March 1971. Its charge was:

- To discover and to look into all aspects of non-traditional postsecondary education, including the external degree, now in operation or being planned;
- To evaluate the desirability and feasibility of such study;
- To identify the inadequacies in current data necessary for intelligent decision making and to press for correction of such inadequacies;
- To make recommendations for creating whatever additional machinery seems appropriate to strengthening the guarantees of quality in these forms of education;
- To explore the possibility of additional experimental models;
- To assure easy accessibility to the large body of information that is presently unsystematized.

The Commission held its second meeting at Ann Arbor, Michigan in July 1971. Between its first and second meetings its members, organized into six subcommittees and assisted by staff, had concentrated on an examination of six basic elements of non-traditional study:

1. The *concepts* from which its own educational philosophy evolves;
2. The kinds of *access* to postsecondary education that exist or should exist, and for whom;
3. The *means* by which education does or should take place;
4. The *models* of non-traditional education that already are functioning or are being planned;

5. The various kinds of *recognition* or reward for educational work completed, including the external degree;
6. The realistic problems of *finance* that surround and possibly limit the pace or extent of growth for this kind of education.

The Ann Arbor meeting was mainly an opportunity for the members to report on their findings to date. These reports led to open discussions that were a first probing of the many issues newly discovered or reidentified. The salient aspects of the Commission's subcommittee work will be published by the end of 1971 for general availability to the public. These publications will serve not only as a fundamental background but also as an indication of the nature and scope of the work still to be done.

Other appropriate publications will follow as the Commission's work proceeds, the first of these probably to be a history and evaluation of the external degree as it is developing in this country.

The Commission is completely independent in its choice of matters to explore, its interpretation of any and all findings, and the nature of any recommendation it decides to make. Its members were chosen not as representatives of organizations but rather because of their own individual experience and what this experience could mean in making judgments or offering stimulating and creative ideas. It is approaching its task without any substantive preconceptions other than its full awareness of how necessary it is in these times to rethink and evaluate the new demands being made on postsecondary education.

At this point we have no answers to give, only questions to explore. And we are determined that once there are promising answers to examine, we will bend every effort on the basis of such promise to encourage action of sufficient significance to have an impact on the future of education. We wish neither to be reactionary nor revolutionary; we wish rather to be a catalytic agent in increasing the pace at which evolutionary educational changes can take place.

The third Commission meeting is presently scheduled for mid-November 1971 in Washington, D. C.

II

During its first six months of preliminary research and discussion, the Commission has made a number of interesting and important discoveries that we would like to share with the public at this time. Some of these are not new to the academic world but all are sufficiently significant to be noted. In general, they point to the lack of knowledge about non-traditional education and the lack of precision with which it is currently developing.

We find enormous interest and considerable activity in non-traditional education already evident throughout the country. Most recently the external degree has been receiving the lion's share of attention, but other non-traditional approaches are also being attempted more widely than we had supposed to be the case. There is a great emotional surge, among educators and the lay public alike, toward a postsecondary educational system with more flexibility than heretofore and with more options from which the individual should be able to choose, regardless of age or circumstances. The reasons for such interest vary but there is no question that it exists. Educators have their major concern centered in desirable academic change; public officials seem to be thinking about economies, which may not be possible.

We find that there is great difficulty in defining in a truly precise way what non-traditional education actually is. The term is so general and so all-encompassing as to defy accurate definition. The suggestion has even been made that by defining *traditional* education clearly one might then consider all that is left to be non-traditional. The elements of change, relevance, flexibility or adaptability to individual need, increased options, use of modern technology, location—these are all pertinent to the development of non-traditional study, however. Perhaps such elements are sufficient as a guide until a more carefully constructed definition emerges.

We find that non-traditional study will continue to develop and grow in this country whether or not it is carefully planned with appropriate evaluations and safeguards to quality. Some of this development and growth is being stimulated from sources independent of our traditional institutions of learning. This is reaching such proportions that a parallel and unrelated system of postsecondary education may ultimately come into being. The

parallelism may be desirable or it may be dangerous; the unrelatedness will certainly pose great dangers and difficulties. There are extremists on both sides here: the rigid traditionalists who are holding fast to their time-honored concepts of *how* education should be offered as well as *what* should be offered, and the revolutionary reformers who wish to sweep away all that has gone before and start afresh.

We find that some existing institutions are rushing into these new forms of education with public commitments unsupported by detailed plans, whether of organization or programs. This is raising unrealistic expectations on the part of prospective students, which may ultimately lead to disillusionment and bitterness. Announcements of early and swift intentions have been made with little or no evidence to indicate that more than a worthy desire exists, and with no fleshing out, as yet, of how these intentions are to be implemented in sound educational ways. We find also that charlatans in our midst are taking advantage of the flexibility of non-traditional education to increase their "diploma-mill" types of operation.

We find that a great body of mythology or folklore about non-traditional study is emerging, not based as yet in fact because of insufficient data. Some is positive, some negative. This new form of education is sometimes championed as the answer to all of education's problems, academic, economic, even psychological; it is just as often condemned for pointing the way to a dangerous dilution of academic quality. It is feared by some private colleges as a threat to their survival; it is feared by faculty as a way by which many of them will be replaced; it is feared by some public institutions of learning as a way by which their operating and capital budgets will be trimmed. As yet, however, there is insufficient evidence to support any of these views.

We find that considerable interest exists among traditional, college-age students in participating somehow in aspects of non-traditional study. Their general dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and their current unrest is leading them to search for more options in their educational pursuits, whether in nonresidential study, independent study, work and study, or others. This is not a majority of students but it is a sizable minority. More needs to be

known about this group and its aspirations or motivations before we can draw any valid conclusions.

We find a general lack of communication and a consequent duplication of effort among those individuals, agencies or institutions engaged in or planning for non-traditional education. Furthermore, opportunities for study that presently exist for the individual are not easily identifiable, nor are there enough systematic ways to communicate such information to him. The mail we have received from all parts of the country and the many interviews we have had convince us that a large number of diverse efforts are currently under way. Yet there is little general knowledge of these and no data on their effectiveness. Everyone seems to be going his own way without regard for what anyone else is doing. Perhaps this is part of the non-traditional spirit, but if so, it may ultimately be a very confusing and wasteful part.

We find that there has been insufficient evaluation of different types of experience that might warrant academic credit in a non-traditional setting. There has been a similar lack of evaluation of the benefits or negative effects of interrupted study. These are two important components about which much more needs to be known.

Finally, we find that the whole area of subject matter for non-traditional study is largely unexplored as yet, at least in the construction of new curricula or modules of courses within these curricula. Whether non-traditional approaches materially affect the subject matter to be offered is open to question. There is a need to examine this point carefully, however, since it lies at the heart of any educational effort. As of now, this has not been done in more than cursory fashion.

III

The Commission's findings have led us to some conclusions about the concept of non-traditional education and the necessary steps for putting such education on a sound academic footing.

The first of these conclusions (and possibly the most important conceptually) is that the philosophy of full opportunity in education is appropriate and should be diligently fostered. This may appear to be a self-evident statement but, realistically speaking, it is not. In these times particularly, with much dissatisfaction expressed about habits, attitudes, actions and moral values of the younger generation coupled with the advent of a new era of financial stringency for education, more and more voices are being raised in behalf of a return to elitism or at least to a much higher degree of student selectivity. Serious questions are being asked about *who* should be educated and *why*. In the course of this protest and questioning all sorts of confusions are emerging, even as to the precise definition of "full opportunity." These confusions will have to be eliminated and a clear basis established from which future planning can proceed.

A second conclusion is that there is more chance for successful change in our postsecondary education approaches by an evolutionary process than by any radical and immediate upheaval. It is true that the time element is more urgent than ever because of the rapidity of change in our society. The evolution must therefore be a swifter one, far swifter than before. But this should not be construed as the abandonment of everything that exists.

The Commission has concluded that non-traditional study requires a considerable amount of counseling and guidance for the potential student. Extraordinary attention must be paid to this preparatory step. Similarly, we are convinced that as the student proceeds with his chosen program, human contacts must be provided to him through conferences with faculty, advisers, and others. Although this may sometimes be difficult to arrange in a nonresidential situation, it is not impossible.

It has become obvious to the Commission that much more data gathering and other forms of research are necessary and that these should be undertaken and completed as soon as possible if sound planning and programming are to result. Not enough is presently known about such basic matters as the types of student populations to be served, their needs, and their poten-

tial interest in furthering their education. Not enough is known about the suitability of the current examination process as a factor in measuring capability or achievement, to say nothing of new examination approaches that may need to be devised. The financial implications of non-traditional study are still unclear and need careful analysis. Areas such as the transferability of credits, the interplay between educators and media programmers, the manpower implications, the changing roles of faculty —these and others await investigation.

It is obvious also that information about non-traditional study —its present models, its successes and failures, its new and experimental efforts—should be more systematically gathered and disseminated than it is now. This function could perhaps be assumed by an already existing agency, and in such a way that particular attention is drawn to new developments as quickly as they are undertaken. Such an agency needs to be identified, however; if it does not exist, it may have to be created.

The Commission has concluded that in order for non-traditional study to move toward a maximum of effectiveness and quality, certain special agencies will also have to be created. These will deal with matters of accreditation and recognition, guidance of the individual in judging his capabilities and planning his program, and with the nature of non-traditional curricula. The precise characteristics of such agencies and their relationship to existing institutions remain to be determined as the Commission continues its deliberations.

The Commission is certain that new relationships between educational institutions and various community agencies—libraries, museums, music and theatre organizations, business, industry, labor, social service—should and will be created as non-traditional study takes a firmer hold on the public consciousness. This suggests the exploration of new kinds of coordination and cooperation, more community-oriented centers for education—a great variety of possibilities as yet untapped and untested. It suggests a major move toward what has been termed "a total learning society" with the campus, the home, and the community (possibly using the public library as the point of information, guidance, testing, and coordination) as the centers of educational activity.

IV

In its preliminary findings and conclusions, the Commission has intensified its awareness of the broad scope and significance of current interest in non-traditional study. Its identification of major questions is still incomplete: for example, the future role of federal, state, and local government is one unexplored area among others. But it has moved far enough to see that non-traditional study can be a major factor in helping to satisfy the hunger of the American people for more education and training beyond the postsecondary level. The Commission will now move to an examination of the detailed necessities for making such education effective.

September 1971

Samuel B. Gould
Chairman

James Parton

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